

A child is born: the enduring mystery of Virgil's fourth *Eclogue*

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'The last age of Cumaean song has now come; the great sequence of the ages is born anew. Now the Virgin too returns, the reign of Saturn returns; now a new lineage is sent down from heaven on high. You, chaste Lucina, look with favour on the child now being born, at whose appearance the iron race first will cease and the golden race will arise throughout the world...'

Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* is one of the strangest poems to have come down to us from antiquity. Its exotic, extravagant proclamations of peace, plenty, and a new world order have been associated with the worship of Dionysus, the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Sibylline Oracles, and the prophecies of Isaiah. Even in the decades following the poem's composition the identity of the mysterious child whose birth will usher in the renewed Golden Age seems to have been a matter of dispute. It may be that Virgil consciously kept obscure the real significance of his description of the wonders that the earth will experience in the consulship of Gaius Asinius Pollio – a sensible move, perhaps, in view of the unsettled political situation of the time. No-one wants to be shown up by events as an incompetent prophet, particularly if the other side proves victorious, and at the time of the Treaty of Brundisium in 40 B.C., traditionally identified as the occasion for Virgil's poem, nobody knew quite how things were going to turn out. How long would the new alliance between Octavian and Mark Antony last, and who would emerge as ruler of the Roman world?

Poetry and propaganda

One result of the vagueness of Virgil's language in the fourth *Eclogue* is that the imagery of this enigmatic poem has been applied in later ages to a bewildering variety of individuals and historical situations. Virgil himself set the pattern, reusing the theme of the returning Golden Age to celebrate Augustus in book 6 of the *Aeneid*. At

Aeneid 6.791–4 he writes:

'Here, here is the man you often hear promised to you – Augustus Caesar, descendant of a god, who will once again establish the Golden Age in Latium through fields once ruled by Saturn...'

Motifs from *Eclogue* 4 have been recycled in praise of rulers ever since. As successors of the first emperor Augustus, Roman Emperors and Holy Roman Emperors after them were regularly greeted on their accession with acclamations of the return of the Golden Age and of peace and prosperity in the natural world drawn from Virgil's lines. The imperial usurper Carausius, who declared himself emperor in Britain in A.D. 286, issued coins featuring the letters RSR and INPCDA, which were deciphered only in 1998 by Guy de la Bedoyère as abbreviated quotations from the fourth *Eclogue* – *redeunt Saturnia regna* ('the reign of Saturn returns', line 6) and *iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto* ('now a new lineage is sent down from heaven on high', line 7).

Certain monarchs and royal dynasties became particularly identified with this Virgilian material: the Hapsburg emperors, for instance, with their claims to universal empire, were frequently saluted with prophecies of a new Golden Age, while Queen Elizabeth I of England, the Virgin Queen, naturally attracted tributes evoking the return of the unnamed Virgin of *Eclogue* 4 (in Virgil's poem a reference to the virgin Astraea, the goddess of Justice, who was said to have fled the earth at the end of the Golden Age). The title of the 2007 film *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* is thus only the latest example in a long tradition of such descriptions of Elizabeth's reign – and similar expressions had in fact been used to praise her father Henry VIII and grandfather Henry VII by poets and scholars familiar with the use of such language in the courts of Renaissance Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Even popes got in on the act. A Latin couplet in the library of Pope Sixtus

V in the Vatican combines words from Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* with a line from Horace's *Carmen saeculare*:

In Sixtus' time the reign of Saturn returns, and Plenty pours wealth from her full horn.

A light in the darkness

This adoption of phrasing and imagery from *Eclogue* 4 to celebrate kings, queens, emperors, dukes, and popes was only one element in the fortunes of this remarkable poem. Equally (if not more) widespread was the use of the fourth *Eclogue* in religious contexts.

From an early date similarities had been noticed between Virgil's portrait of the new Golden Age, in which 'herds will not fear great lions' (*Ecl.* 4.22) and 'the serpent too shall perish' (*Ecl.* 4.24), and the Hebrew prophecies of Isaiah, in which 'the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid' and 'the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp' (Isaiah 11). When this was combined with references in Virgil's poem to the return of the Virgin and the descent of a miraculous child from heaven, 'who will rule a world made peaceful by his father's virtues' (*Ecl.* 4.17), early Christian readers drew the inevitable conclusion. Virgil became a conscious or unconscious prophet of the coming of Christ, inspired to foretell events that would not take place until twenty years after his death. A speech attributed to the emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, offers a reading of the fourth *Eclogue* along these lines, as a prediction of the birth of Christ: 'Who, then, is the virgin who was to come [*Ecl.* 4.6]? Is it not she who was filled with, and with child of, the Holy Spirit? ... Those who search deeply for the import of the words [*Ecl.* 4.8–10], are able to discern the Divinity of Christ'.

The view of Virgil – or of the Sibyl of Cumae, who is given as the source for the prophecies of his poem ('the last age of

Cumaean song', *Ecl.* 4.5) – as a prophet of the promised Messiah was to endure for centuries. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the Roman poet Statius tells how he was converted to Christianity by reading Virgil's fourth *Eclogue*, the full meaning of which was not clear to its author, who for that reason never embraced Christianity and so cannot enter Paradise with Dante:

*You first directed me to Parnassus
to drink in its caves, and first after
God it was you who enlightened me.
You acted like someone who goes by
night, who carries the light behind
him and does not help himself, but
makes people wise after him, when
you said: 'The age renews itself;
justice returns and the earliest time
of humankind, and a new lineage
descends from heaven.' Through
you I was a poet, through you a
Christian... (Dante, *Purgatory*
22.64–73).*

The ever-circling years

Another striking result of this reading of the fourth *Eclogue* is the appearance of Sibyls in paintings in churches, holding scrolls with quotations from Virgil's poem. In Rome alone there are no fewer than four examples of this, to say nothing of the Sibyl of Cumae represented on the marble pavement of Siena Cathedral with a caption from *Eclogue* 4. It is often suggested that Michelangelo's famous figure of the Sibyl of Cumae in Rome's Sistine Chapel was inspired by the fourth *Eclogue* – but in this case it is impossible to make out any words in the Sibyl's book, so the suggestion cannot be conclusively proved. Further instances of quotations from the poem in religious art can be seen in churches in France, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands; the latest example I've come across is an early-twentieth-century stained glass window in Aberdeen.

Even today many people are familiar with at least one example of the religious interpretation of the fourth *Eclogue*, without necessarily being aware of the Virgilian origins of the passage. In one of the best-known Christmas carols, *It came upon the midnight clear* (words by Edmund Hamilton Sears, 1810–76), we find the lines:

*For lo! the days are hastening on
By prophet bards foretold,
When, with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold;
When Peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world give back the
song,
Which now the angels sing.*

The reference to 'prophet bards' suggests

the Latin word *vates*, which means both 'poet' and 'prophet', while the prophecy of 'the age of gold' (compare the 'golden race', *gens aurea*, at *Ecl.* 4.9) brought on by 'the ever-circling years' (a cyclical conception of time comparable to Virgil's announcements of a renewed sequence of ages in *Ecl.* 4.5 and 12), and of the establishment of peace 'over all the earth' (see *Ecl.* 4.9, *toto...mundo*), unmistakably recalls ideas and expressions from *Eclogue* 4: 'ancient splendours' indeed!

Coming around again

It may not always be easy to think of our own times as a new Golden Age, but the long life enjoyed by Virgil's most cryptic poem in later art and literature is by no means over. Seamus Heaney's *Bann Valley Eclogue*, first published in 1999, echoes the fourth *Eclogue* to express the poet's hopes for peace in Northern Ireland, and a new opera on the emperor Nero, *Neron Kaisar*, by composer John Peel with a libretto by M. D. Usher, opens with Nero's mother Agrippina singing lines from the fourth *Eclogue* as she strokes her son's face. There is even an instrumental track by the Greek black metal band Varathron with the title *Redeunt Saturnia regna*.

The fourth *Eclogue* is still very much with us, and while it may no longer be possible to know what it meant to its author and his contemporaries, the meanings it has taken on for different readers in later centuries provide ample evidence of this curious poem's continuing power to inspire artists and writers who have fallen under its strange but compelling spell.

Luke Houghton teaches Classics at the University of Reading, UCL and Birkbeck College, London. He is currently working on the reception of Virgil's fourth Eclogue in a number of different times, places, and artistic media, and is hopeful that this work will eventually contribute to a new Golden Age in the study of this mysterious poem.